

# Pro Patria Press

#54

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*Newsletter of the 31st Infantry Regiment Association*  
*Karl Lowe, Editor*

## Combat in Korea

*This is the 21st in our series on combat in Korea. In our previous edition, the regiment had reached Central Korea as part of a UN counteroffensive. The saga continues...*

On June 4, the 31st Infantry Regiment penetrated Chinese lines near the Hwachon Reservoir and took the heights overlooking the town of Kumhwa at the Iron Triangle's apex before its attack was halted. The regiment's attack started quietly enough, but soon ran into a buzz saw. I Company's action is illustrative. At 3 PM on June 5, I Company, initially in reserve near the village of Hwachon-Myon, was ordered to take the largest hill (later dubbed "Hell Hill") overlooking the reservoir. Artillery pounded the crest while riflemen trudged up the long, steep slope. Sergeant Charles Bielecki, a squad leader with the 2nd Platoon, recalls that midway up the hill, someone gave the order to fix bayonets. Soon afterward, artillery fire was lifted and his Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Richard Smock, shouted, "commence firing". Until then, no one had fired on the company and there was no enemy visible to shoot at. Bielecki muttered to himself, "looks like this is going to be a cake walk". It wasn't.

As I Company approached the Chinese trenches, automatic weapons fire erupted all along the hill's crest. Lieutenant Smock was one of the first men hit. He and his runner were both hit in the head and killed instantly. Lieutenant Blair Willard took command and the attack continued. Knowing a retreat down the long open hillside would be suicidal, Willard summoned a reserve of strength, leading a charge that overran the enemy trench line with bayonets and rifle butts. As the company moved across open ground toward a second line of trenches, one of Sergeant Bielecki's men warned him of a Chinese soldier on his left, previously hidden from view. He turned and fired, hitting the man several times at close range.

Moments later, the trench came alive. Grenades flew over the parapets by the dozens, followed closely by a blaze of automatic weapons fire. Fortunately, most of the grenades were duds, but automatic weapons fire took its toll. During the dash to the enemy's trenches, the 2nd Platoon's 2nd Squad somehow got out in front of the rest of the company. They soon found themselves surrounded by Chinese troops who hit them with everything they had at close range. Eight men went in and seven quickly went down. Among them was the squad leader, Corporal James C. Toth, a reservist from Atwood, Kansas. A bullet struck him in the forehead as he shouted to PFC Don Monterosso to pull back. Toth's facial expression changed to surprise and he stopped shouting in mid-sentence and crumpled to the ground. Moments later, Monterosso was tossed into the air like a limp rag doll when a grenade exploded at his feet. When he landed, his helmet and rifle were gone and he had no idea which direction to run, but luckily he made the right decision and his mangled legs somehow cooperated.

Seeing a ragged looking figure coming across the hill toward him, Bielecki raised his rifle to shoot. A terrified voice shouted, "Don't shoot, it's me, Monterosso, please don't shoot." Monterosso was a mess and it was a wonder he was even able to stand, much less run. Both legs were ripped open and bleeding profusely and his trousers were a shredded mass of rags. Medics

helped him to safety and began patching him up. He spent the night at the battalion aid station. After a painful evacuation by ambulance over barely passable roads to the 8076th MASH (Swedish), Monterosso was moved by air to Osaka Army Hospital in Japan. After three operations and six weeks in the hospital, he was back on the line in Korea. He soldiered on with I Company until his tour in Korea ended in October 1951. When he departed, he was one of the few men remaining who had gone ashore at Inchon just over a year earlier.

Throughout his life, Don Monterosso's legs still hurt when winter's icy chill swept across the lakes of his native Michigan. When he died, he had been confined to a wheel chair for two years. Memories of Korea lingered like his wounds, inspiring him to write poetry that commemorated the lives of his fallen comrades. Don's own words in a letter he wrote to me in 1997 sum it up best: *"I remember all that happened to me in my 14 months and 20 days in the Far East. I also remember faces, but few names. There were so many I never got to know, many of them younger than my 19 years. The faces whose names I will never forget are Corporal Toth, Lieutenant Wilson, Higa, Jaime, Peoples, Captain Joy, Merchant, Bielecki, Jamerino, and Jordan. I am 64 now and a semi-invalid, but in my mind I am forever that 19-year old infantryman, humping the hills and mountains of Korea with a pack on my back and a rifle in my hand. I came home 44 years ago, but a part of me will always be in Korea. Some nights I still fight the battles, climb the hills, hunch over the fires, wonder how I made it home, and shed tears for those who didn't".* (Don Monterosso died the following year).

About an hour after the fighting began on "Hell Hill", a company of ROK troops wearing yellow scarves arrived behind I Company to lend their support. Before they ever reached the first trench line, the Chinese sent up four red flares, their signal for a counterattack. As bugles began blowing in the distance, the ROKs ran right back down the hill without firing a shot.

### **The 4th BATTALION 1965-1971**

*This is the 2nd in the series on the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, addressing its deployment to Vietnam. It will be a series in the newsletter like those that covered combat in Siberia, Bataan, and Korea in earlier editions.*

The 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade left Boston on July 15 aboard the troopships USNS *William O. Darby* and USNS *Alexander M. Patch* and sailed southward along the Atlantic coast.<sup>1</sup> Their destination was Vietnam. In an effort to maintain discipline and a sharp edge, troops were kept busy with physical training, sanitation details, and classes on jungle warfare, survival, weaponry, and tactics. Taking training seriously aboard rolling troopships amid the smells of diesel fuel and vomit was more than a challenge. Skirting storms in the Atlantic, the convoy passed through the Panama Canal and headed west, stopping at Long Beach, California to refuel and replenish rations.<sup>2</sup>

After a gut-wrenching month at sea, the brigade reached Vung Tau, Vietnam on August 15. The 4-31<sup>st</sup> Infantry's advance party, led by its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh J. Lynch, had arrived by air on August 6 and met the troops at the docks. Air Force C-130 transports took them the remaining distance to Tay Ninh, their new home. In the shadow of a dormant volcano called Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain), Tay Ninh, with a 1966 population of around 200,000, is an important market town and Buddhist religious center surrounded by rubber and tea plantations

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<sup>1</sup> The *Patch* and *Darby* transported troops overseas during the Korean War. After the war, both transported troops and dependents to and from Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Pictures courtesy of 175<sup>th</sup> Engineer Company website.

and rice fields. The Cambodian border is only 12 miles to its north. Saigon is 65 miles to the southeast but the Viet Cong frequently ambushed convoys and mined the roads. The 196<sup>th</sup> LIB's arrival at Tay Ninh was accompanied by an unwelcome surprise. General Westmoreland, the Commander of US Forces in Vietnam, placed the 196<sup>th</sup> under the US 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's control and reassigned its Artillery Commander, Brigadier General Edward H. DeSaussure, Jr., as the 196<sup>th</sup>'s commander, downgrading Colonel Conaty's position to Deputy Commander.

Arriving at Tay Ninh will live forever in the memory of all who endured it. The temperature was 124° and the battalion's bivouac area was two miles from the airfield, a hike everyone had to make with dufflebag, weapons, and full field gear. There were no facilities of any kind at the Polar Bears' new home, so they lived in tents. Because they arrived during monsoon season, vehicular traffic was impossible around the muddy bivouac site. Consequently, all equipment, supplies, food, and water had to be hauled by hand over the two-mile stretch from the airfield.

## **The 6th BATTALION 1967-1970**

*This is the second in a series on the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, addressing its deployment to Vietnam. This, like the articles on Korea and the 4th Battalion, will be a continuing series in the newsletter.*

After six months of training, the Bearcats were alerted for deployment. The advance party, including Lieutenant Colonel Schmalhorst, all six company commanders, and Command Sergeant Major Bill Russell, departed from McChord Air Force Base on March 31, 1968. Captain John DeVore recalls arriving at Chu Lai, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade's base camp, expecting it to be the Bearcats' new home. He arranged to accompany a friend in another battalion on a combat operation to familiarize himself with the environment but his time at Chu Lai was unexpectedly cut short. The advance party was abruptly ordered to pack up and board C-130 cargo planes for Bien Hoa, nearly 400 miles away. The "Americal" Division shoulder patches (left) already sewn on Bearcats' uniforms would now be out of place. Although they did not know it yet, they would soon be joining the 9th Infantry Division ("The Old Reliables"). The 9th (patch at right) needed another battalion because its area of operations had recently been extended from the outskirts of Saigon into the Mekong Delta and from the South China Sea to the Cambodian border.

The Bearcats' main body arrived at Bien Hoa on April 5. Most traveled aboard commercial airliners but some had to accompany the unit's light vehicles aboard less comfortable Air Force cargo planes. All arrived with a duffle bag, web gear, and camouflage-covered helmets, looking like infantrymen of the era should. Weapons were quickly retrieved from the planes' cargo bays, but to everyone's shock, there was no place on the airfield to draw ammunition.

With the temperature hovering above 100°, the battalion traveled its next 20 miles in open trucks to the 9th Division's base camp, coincidentally named Bearcat Base. It seemed insane to be without ammunition in a war zone and to travel in crowded trucks that would have been death traps in an ambush.<sup>3</sup> Things did not get better at Bearcat. Men expecting to fight were subjected to seemingly endless orientation briefings and housekeeping chores that seemed out of place in a war zone. At home, Martin Luther King was assassinated the day the main body arrived, stirring racial tensions in the post's oppressive atmosphere. The Pacific Stars and Stripes (soldiers' overseas newspaper) and Armed Forces Radio delivered a steady barrage of unsettling news

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<sup>3</sup> Photos of assembly at Bien Hoa and truck convoy to Bearcat Base courtesy of Del Bumann (D Company).

about race riots aflame in the nation's largest cities, causing some to worry more about families back home than themselves at war.

Bearcat Base's setting was striking, with Vietnam's scenic coastal mountains visible to the northwest, coastal jungles and mangrove swamps to the south, and Saigon's hazy skyline to the southeast. For nearly three weeks, the 6-31st underwent acclimatization training, patrolling nearby rubber plantations and jungle.<sup>4</sup> The jungle was double and triple canopy—full-grown trees growing under two or three layers of taller trees. Bill Singleton recalls, "In the jungle, you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you and couldn't see the sky--helicopters couldn't find us, but millions of red ants could and did." The battalion's first non-battle casualty occurred on April 19 when a soldier from C Company wounded himself with his own weapon. Earlier that day, the company had conducted its first air assault and had its first firefight, an inconclusive encounter with a VC reconnaissance team.

### Reunions

Reunion 2009 is set for August 27-29 at Watertown, New York. The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion 31st Infantry will host the reunion, including a "Day with the Polar Bears", including a live fire small unit air assault demonstration, followed by an association picnic with the soldiers who participate in the demonstration.

### Officers of the Association

Elections for a new slate of officers will be held at our next reunion. Charlie Tapp heads the nomination committee. If you are interested in running for office, write him at 215 Waterford Dr, Inman, SC 29349-0705, call him at 864-473-1999, or email him at [charlietapp@alltel.net](mailto:charlietapp@alltel.net) or [charlie@cctrucking.com](mailto:charlie@cctrucking.com). Current serving officers are:

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<sup>4</sup> Shorthand unit descriptions are according to Army convention, with platoons and companies followed by a slash and battalions followed by a dash. For example, 1st Platoon, A Company, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 31st Infantry would be shown as 1/A/6-31st Inf.

West (HI, AK, WA, OR, CA, NV, AZ, UT, ID, MT, WY) **Houston Turner**

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### **Vinh Kiem Rice Fund**

Jerry White and his bride Barbara organized help for the people of Vinh Kiem during a recent drought and famine. 3rd platoon came through 40 years after the most of them had last seen the place. They and a few others provided over \$4000 worth of rice at \$30 per hundred pounds.

### **Road 2 Recovery California Challenge**

Dear Fellow Polar Bears, I am reaching out and asking that you help me make a difference in helping our injured soldiers & veterans. Sponsor me as I participate in the Road 2 Recovery California Challenge from San Francisco to Los Angeles 4-10 Oct 2009. Money raised for the Road 2 Recovery ride will support recovery programs for combat-wounded veterans at Military and VA locations around the United States.

Cycling provides a low impact physical endurance and emotional release exercise from the demons & stress of returning to life after war and injury. Cycling also helps reintroduce and transition the injured back into society. It provides a support network outside of the traditional VA system. Cycling friends will always be present and available when parents die, spouses divorce, and the VA is over burdened.

Visit the website [www.road2recovery.us.com](http://www.road2recovery.us.com) and learn more about this important event and organization. Every penny of your donation will go directly to these valuable programs, and your donation is tax deductible. If you would like to donate online just follow the link and add my name (Hugh Mc Larnon) as the rider you would like to sponsor.

<http://www.r2riders.com/sponsor/> You can also mail a check payable to Fitness Challenge Foundation to:

Fitness Challenge Foundation

23679 Calabasas Rd #420 Calabasas , CA 91302

Please indicate my name Hugh Mc Larnon in the "comments" area of your check.

Pro Patria, Hugh Mc Larnon, Asst Ops Officer 4-31st Inf 1998; Commander, B/4-31st Inf 1999-2000; Commander HHC/4-31st Inf 2000-2001.

*“The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have” – Vince Lombardi*

### **Taps**

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|---------------------------|---|----------------|
| <b>Richard Bartilucci</b> | SP4, HHC 1st BG Korea, 1957               | Plainview, NY  |
| <b>Jim Bergstrom</b>      | SP4, D/6th Bn, (3rd Plt) Vietnam, 1969-70 | Austin, MN     |
| <b>Bernard J Dashner</b>  | G, L, and Hvy Mort Cos, Korea 1953-54     | Gallitzin, PA  |
| <b>Thomas H Dunn</b>      | PFC, K Co, Korea, 1947-49                 | Sun City, AZ   |
| <b>Gerald J Fulton</b>    | CPL, K Co, (1st Plt) Korea, 1952-53       | Fort Dodge, IA |

**John W Starkey**      CPT, HHC 1st Bn, (Adjutant) Korea, 1953      Norfolk, NY  
**Thomas I Walker**    LT, A Co, (Plt Ldr & XO) Korea, 1950-52      Summerton, SC

### **Retiring**

Kelly and I will be making the transition to civilian life this Spring. Our retirement ceremony will be held in conjunction with a change of responsibility ceremony on 21 May @ 1000 on Patriot Field on Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs. Formal invitations will go out 4-6 weeks before that date but wanted you to have the date time group to be able to mark your calendars. This will allow those from out of town to arrange a visit to a unit of interest in the Colorado Springs area. It has been an honor to work and serve with you all and Kelly and I would be honored if you were able to attend.

CSM Daniel R. Wood (Command Sergeant Major, 4th Battalion 31st Infantry 2000-2002)  
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### **Websites**

Please check out our website and sign our guest book at [www.31stinfantry.org](http://www.31stinfantry.org) See related sites:

- 4<sup>th</sup> Bn 31<sup>st</sup> Inf: <http://www.drum.army.mil/sites/tenants/division/2BCT/4-31INF/>
- 6<sup>th</sup> Bn 31<sup>st</sup> Inf: [www.6thofthe31st.com](http://www.6thofthe31st.com) and [www.vietnam6bn31inf.com](http://www.vietnam6bn31inf.com)
- 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division: [www.7th-inf-div-assn.com](http://www.7th-inf-div-assn.com).
- 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division: [www.9thinfdivsociety.org](http://www.9thinfdivsociety.org).
- 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division: [www.americal.org](http://www.americal.org) and 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade: [www.196th.org](http://www.196th.org).
- Karen Smith's tribute to the 31<sup>st</sup> Inf: <http://31rct.tripod.com/>